DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 167 032 HE 011 026

AUTHOR Akst, Geoffrey
TITLE Minimum Competency Comes to College: Putting the CUNY Experience in Perspective.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 11p.; Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; *Basic Skills; College Programs; *Educational Accountability; Higher Education; Mastery Tests; *Minimum Competency Testing; Open Enrollment; *Performance Criteria; Secondary Education; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *City University of New York; Competence

ABSTRACT

Minimum competency testing, in which passing a uniform test is necessary (but not sufficient) for promotion or graduation, has been carried out in a number of colleges, including the City University of New York (CUNY). Competency programs usually have three basic components: placement testing, remedial instruction, and exit testing. Competency testing at the high school level is typically mandated on a statewide basis. At the college level, there is also a trend toward systemwide programs, particularly in open admissions schools. Most competency programs in both the high schools and colleges test traditional basic skills: reading, writing, math, and particularly at the college level, elementary algebra. Information is presented on testing programs at CUNY, public colleges of New Jersey, and the university system of Georgia. The extent to which math competency tests should stress conventional arithmetic is a matter of controversy. Although there is public support for competency testing, it has been criticized on the basis of the test content, which in some programs has been characterized as culturally biased and therefore discriminatory. Other criticisms have been directed to the level of difficulty of the tests, the neglect of the rest of the curriculum because of the emphasis on basic skills, and the need to base assessment on teachers' perceptions as well as test scores. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Geoffrey Akst TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED167032

MINIMUM COMPETENCY COMES TO COLLEGE: PUTTING THE CUNY EXPERIENCE IN PERSPECTIVE

Geoffrey Akst
Borough of Manhattan Community College

HE 011026

Along with the reduction in the number of electives and the repudiation of New Math, a principal manifestation of the powerful back-to-basics movement has been the proliferation of programs of minimum competency. These programs, in which passing a uniform skills test is necessary (but not sufficient) for promotion or graduation, have swept through our country's schools. In 1976, high schools in only one state and a handful of local school districts had this kind of standard; today high schools in two-thirds of the states are about to come around or have already done so. Similarly, competency programs have gained a footing on a number of college campuses--at small institutions like Delhi Tech and at giants like the City University of New York.

While varying with respect to details, competency programs generally have three basic components:

(1) Placement testing in which a uniform exam is administered to incoming students in order to identify those needing special help in elementary language and math skills.

(2) Remedial instruction to provide this assistance.

(3) Exit testing, usually with several chances to pass, to ensure that remediated students are proficient.

Those students who repeatedly fail the exit exam in even a single skills area are generally not graduated no matter how good

their achievement in other areas. Thus, in the extreme case of Vermont high schools, students have to pass 51 little proficiency subtests in order to be graduated; failing students must settle for some sort of quasi-diploma. In Denver, where competency testing goes back to the 1950's, some 2% of each year's high school seniors are awarded certificates of attendance instead of diplomas. In some particularly stringent programs like that in Arizona's high schools, repeated failure will prevent not only graduation but also promotion to the next grade. In two-year colleges, similar penalties obtain; and in a number of four-year colleges, students who fail repeatedly are required to leave after their sophomore year although they may be granted an associate's degree.

Competency testing at the high school level is typically mandated on a statewide basis. Some states -- for example, New York and Florida -- have imposed uniform tests and cut scores. In most others, however, local school districts are allowed to choose their own. In California, each of the hundreds of school districts determines the very skills to be measured. By extending this kind of local option, the central authority sacrifices some degree of control but reduces conflict with the school's traditional curricular prerogatives.

Competency programs at the college level while certainly not unheard of a half-dozen years ago seem to be increasing in number. A most striking aspect of this development is the evolution toward system-wide programs like those in the high schools, particularly in Open Admissions college systems and universities. The 36 public

colleges of New Jersey recently took a step in this direction by adopting uniform skills placement exams. The 31 units of the University System of Georgia have a minimum competency program in the language skills. And the City University of New York has competency testing in mathematics as well as reading and writing in its 17 units (see Table I).

Most competency programs in both the high schools and the colleges test traditional basic skills--reading, writing, arithmetic, and, particularly at the college level, elementary algebra. Some programs, however, are less conventional. In Maryland's high schools, for example, only reading is covered. In Oregon, "speaking" and "listening" are subtests in addition to the three R's. New York State's high school competency program was to have involved exams in civics and science (including drug addiction!) but these have been dropped.

The content of a number of programs stresses the application of basic skills to "real-life" situations--filling out job applications, interpreting instructions, balancing a bank statement, etc. These, however, are the exception. Most competency programs are more school-oriented, testing the reading of academic passages, etc.

New York State's high school battery of tests is probably not very different in content from that of many other states. The writing exam asks each student to write a business letter, a report and a statement advocating a point of view. The reading test consists of a series of non-fiction prose passages of increasing

Table I

Testing Programs at the
City University of New York, the
Public Colleges of New Jersey,
and the University System of Georgia

	CUNY	NJPC	USG
Reading Placement Test	yes	yes	yes
Writing Placement Test	yes	yes	yes
Mathematics Placement Test	yes	yes	yes
Uniform Tests	yes	yes	yes
Uniform Cut Scores	yes	no	yes
Early Testing	yes	yes	yes
Remedial Instruction	yes	yes	yes
Exit Testing	yes	not uniform	Reading-yes Writing-yes Math-no
Penalty	yes- denial of promotion to the junior year	---	yes- denial of promotion to the junior year

difficulty; the score on this test is supposed to reflect the most difficult prose reading material which the student can comprehend. The mathematics exam covers chiefly arithmetic with a few questions on elementary algebra and informal geometry. It is easy to see how traditional this content is by its similarity to the list of basic math topics drawn up by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1947 (see Table II).

The extent to which math competency tests should stress conventional arithmetic, however, is a matter of controversy. Many in the mathematics community feel that the current emphasis on paper-and-pencil algorithms is misplaced. With the widespread availability of cheap, portable calculators, long division and the addition of fractions may ultimately become as outmoded as the slide rule. However, other educators believe that abandoning traditional computation is unwise for at least two reasons: first, the effect on the students's mathematical development is as yet unclear; and second, personnel and admissions tests still demand these skills.

There seems little doubt that public support for the back-to-basics movement in general and for competency testing in particular is widespread. In fact, a recent poll indicates that a majority of the public is in favor of a national high school skills competency exam. However, competency testing is most certainly not immune to criticism. One line of attack is directed against the test content, which in some programs has been characterized as culturally biased and therefore discriminatory. In this connection, the National Academy of Education's Commission on

Table II

Basic Mathematics Then and Now: The 1947 NCTM* Listing of Basic Math Topics vs. The 1979 New York State High School Math Competency Test

TOPIC	NCTM - 1947	NYS - 1979
Whole Numbers	X	X
Fractions	X	X
Decimals	X	X
Percents	X	X
Signed Numbers	X	X
Measurement	X	X
The Metric System	X	X
Tables and Graphs	X	X
Informal Geometry	X	X
Basic Algebra	X	X
Ratio and Proportion	X	X
Mathematical Reasoning	X	X
Elementary Statistics	X	X
Business and Consumer Math	X	X
Estimation	X	
Trigonometric Functions	X	
Square Roots	X	
Addition of Vectors	X	
Elementary Probability		X

*The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics

Testing and Basic Skills writes ominously: "If success on tests is achieved by four-fifths of a suburban school system but only one-third of a central city's system, the consequences could be serious for domestic tranquility as well as social equity in a world where a high school diploma, regardless of its intrinsic meaning, is frequently a ticket to particular jobs." And the NAACP has already raised this issue with regard to Florida's high school tests on which the passing rate was reportedly much lower among minority students. The creation of a caste of school rejects may be considered particularly unfair if insufficient funds are provided for effective remediation, a real possibility at a time of shrinking school budgets.

Level of difficulty may also become a bone of contention. For example, when New York State tried out its exams last year in a dry run, influential critics found them to be so easy as to make the entire testing program meaningless. Some even charged that they would discourage more capable students from working towards high levels of excellence and so would actually have a negative impact on skills development. So great a furor was raised by the press that the tests had to be withdrawn. Since then new and reportedly more demanding exams have been developed. A rather somber note is that even with the original, relatively easy exams, a larger proportion of students failed in New York State (11% in language, 37% in mathematics) than had failed corresponding exams in Florida.

Competency programs--and indeed the whole back-to-basics movement--have been attacked on more fundamental grounds than just

the content or difficulty of particular tests. Although the movement is basically conservative in nature, a good deal of opposition is based on the premise that emphasizing skills slights the rest of the curriculum. Critics charge that shifting resources to remedial instruction "trivializes" the curriculum, with the liberal arts, social values, etc., getting short shrift. There are also those who claim that even in remedial classes competency testing results in a downgrading of standards as instructors teach to the test, neglecting the broader objectives of the course.

Within the education community, particularly at the pre-college level, opposing points of view have developed. While most teachers recognize the need to raise standards, they may still object to the use of competency tests in attempting to achieve this end. Many believe that student assessment is more accurate if it is based on teachers' perceptions as well as test scores. Thus, the executive director of the National Education Association (NEA), an organization which opposes competency programs, speaks of the "tyranny of impersonalized standardized testing...that ignores the individual child and the judgement of teachers." Another concern, particularly in system-wide competency programs, is the external imposition of curriculum which uniform testing can entail. Finally, there is the nagging suspicion that test results will be used to compare the productivity of teachers. In that vein, a bulletin of the American Federation of Teachers--which generally supports competency programs--asks if the tests are actually rating students or teachers; an NEA report expresses the fear that the teacher will be blamed for high failure rates whenever they occur.

While all these issues are being thrashed out, competency testing has become a fact of life, changing the significance of the high school and the college diploma. At CUNY, in New York's high schools and around the country, the reverberations are just beginning.

Bibliography

Clark, J.; and Thomson, S.: Competency Tests and Graduation Requirements. The National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va., 1976 (Also ERIC ED 126 160)

Educational Testing Service: Basic Skills Assessment Around the Nation. An ETS Report. Educational Testing Service, 1977, ERIC ED 152 796

Fillbrant, J.; and Merz, W.: Minimum Proficiencies and the Fine Art of Setting Standards, The NASSP Bulletin, February 1978, pp. 70-75

Gilman, D.: The Logic of Minimal Competency Testing, The NASSP Bulletin, September 1978, pp. 56-63

Golladay, M.: The Condition of Education, 1977 Edition, a Statistical Report on the Condition of Education in the United States, Volume Three, Part One, The National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C., 1977

Goor, J.; and Tomlinson, T.: Statewide Developments in Performance-based Education, a Survey of State Education Agencies. The National Center for Educational Statistics, Washington, D.C., 1976

Hills, J.: Proficiency Testing: Implications for Higher Education. The Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, Ga., 1977 (Also ERIC ED 151 404)

Keefe, J.; and Georgiades, C.: Competency-based Education and the High School Diploma, The NASSP Bulletin, April 1978, pp. 94-107

NCTM: The Second Report of the Commission on Post-War Plans, The Mathematics Teacher, May 1945, pp. 195-221

NCTM: Mathematical Competencies and Skills Essential for Enlightened Citizens, The Arithmetic Teacher, November 1972, pp. 601-607

NCTM: The Mathematics Teacher (Special Issue on Minimum Competency), February 1978

New Jersey Council on Basic Skills, Department of Higher Education: Various Unpublished Documents

New York State Education Department: Various Unpublished Documents

Pipho, C.: Minimal Competency Testing: A Look at State Standards, Educational Leadership, April 1977, pp. 516-520